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Peepshows for All: Performing Words and the Travelling Showman

Abstract: The ‘peepshow’ was one of the commonest and cheapest forms of optical entertainment for most of the nineteenth century: however, it has received relatively little scholarly attention. This essay explores the heyday of the peepshow through a detailed exploration of its exhibition spaces, performance practices, and audience experiences, as well as its relationship with other popular forms such as theatre, lecturing, and illustrated journalism. In particular, the essay argues that the peepshow should not be seen as predominantly a ‘visual’ show, but, rather, that the oral performance of the peep showman was crucial to the appeal and organisation of the exhibition. The visual tableaux were subservient to his narrative, and the showman needs to be seen as part of the growth of illustrated lecturing during the period.

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Introduction

The ‘peepshow’ was one of the commonest forms of optical entertainment during the nineteenth century. It was a staple of fairs, wakes, market days, races, regattas, and shop shows. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens describes a country fair where one of the exhibits was a worn-out peepshow that “had originally started with the Battle of Waterloo, and had since made it every other battle of later date by altering the Duke of Wellington’s nose” (Dickens 2008, 690). Despite the upsurge of critical interest in the exhibition spaces of travelling shows such as portable theatres, penny gaffs, fairs, circuses, and the melange of itinerant scientific exhibitions, surprisingly little research has been done on the peepshow given its importance.¹ Both popular and scholarly understandings of this

¹ The notable exception is Balzer, Richard (1998). *Peepshows: A Visual History*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams. On interest in exhibition spaces, see Fyfe Aileen and Bernard Lightman, eds. (2008). *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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format have been skewed by the salacious reputation it acquired in the final decades of the century. This was largely due to the advent of the mutoscope and a host of similar automatic machines showing risqué pictures; the moral panic they caused was exacerbated by broader anxieties over the influence of mass entertainment in the 1880s and 1890s (Brown and Anthony 1999). The peepshow needs to be rescued from its own mythology through a more nuanced understanding of its exhibition spaces, performance practices, and audience experiences, as well as its relationship with other popular forms such as theatre, lecturing, and illustrated journalism.

Along with the panorama, diorama, magic lantern, and stereoscope, the peepshow forms part of the proliferation of visual shows that characterised nineteenth-century culture. While there has been a great deal of scholarship on the impact of these new modes of visibility, recent work has taken a more material, phenomenological turn. As Patrizia Di Bello and Luisa Calè note, the decorporealised and/or disciplined gaze has been replaced by an embodied viewer, such that “[t]he experience of looking – whether reading texts or enjoying pictures – is never *just* visual, but is also tactile, kinaesthetic, fully embodied, and affected by the material properties of the objects we do our looking and reading with” (Calè and Di Bello 2010, 4–5). The peepshow, like other optical shows, needs to be seen in this light; it thrived by exploiting multiple ‘ways of seeing.’ It provoked intense curiosity, detached amusement, contemplation, awed wonder, condemnation or knowing appreciation, as well as the straightforward transmission of information from exhibitor to audience. Moreover, the very longevity of the peepshow, and its corresponding familiarity to audiences, complicates the dominant historiographical narrative that too easily aligns nineteenth-century visual pleasure with novelty, innovation and, indeed, modernity itself.

The peepshow, despite its name, was never simply ‘visual,’ invariably being composed of all manner of attractions – as much aural, musical, haptic, habitual, and convivial. As research concerning Victorian exhibitions and popular science has made abundantly clear, nineteenth-century cultures of display and showmanship made powerful use of both verbal and visual techniques to fascinate the public (Kember, Plunkett, and Sullivan 2012). For example, Martin Hewitt has argued that popular shows were most likely to be characterised by a “spectacle of words,” restating the importance of their oral and aural component, while Samuel Alberti has shown that the nineteenth-century scientific *conversazione* gave audiences the opportunity to actively engage in the event “through sight, speech, sound, and touch” (Alberti 2003, 224; Hewitt 2012, 79–96). My essay similarly argues that the oral performance of the peep showman was key to its appeal. It was his tactics of showmanship that organised the meaning of the visual tableaux and the audience experience. He needs to be given his rightful place as one

of the earliest types of illustrated lecturer, pre-dating the heyday of panorama, diorama, and lantern lecturers.

The importance of the peep showman – his ability to verbally engage with, and draw in, his audience through his patter – exemplifies the way that exhibitions and shows of all kinds were rarely delivered or received in a passive, silent, or unquestioning manner. Audiences had at their disposal a wide range of performative attitudes of their own, exercising these before, during, or after the exhibition. At the peepshow, there were always two audiences, at least two sets of experiences, for the showman's performance. There was the audience viewing the show inside the peep-box, and the “onlookers” who were watching the “inlookers” while still listening to the showman and adding their own observations, banter, and commentary. While there was a diversity of exhibitions across the period in which enclosed scenes were viewed through lenses, as a specific type of entertainment, the peepshow was largely defined by the orality of the showman and his audience interaction, which was itself a product of the lively outdoor events at which he exhibited.

From “Show-Box” to “Peepshow”: A *longue durée*

The “peepshow” was a nineteenth-century label for a familiar device: a sign both of the scopophilia of the age and the never-ending propensity of showmen to “make it new.” It was, nonetheless, a comparative latecomer to a long genealogy of enclosed show-boxes. Classifying earlier devices as “peepshows” risks creating associations that disguise the rather different contexts of their production and exhibition. Indeed, with the term “peepshow” itself, its initial usage seems to have little of the salaciousness that subsequently tarred the format. The first use of “peepshow” cited by the *OED* is 1801; there are only occasional references up until the 1820s.² Prior to “peepshow,” “raree show” was the most common term used, although, there was also “show-box,” “optical machine,” “zograscope,” “diagonal mirror,” and “perspective glass” (Blake 2000, 7). This heterogeneous terminology reflects the number of different devices in circulation, and the corresponding variety of spaces – from the village fair to the fine art collector's study – in which they could be found.

The first optical show-boxes were the product of early modern research into the properties of lenses and mirrors; experiments demonstrating the effects

² The *British Library Newspaper Archive* records two usages from the 1810s, but thirteen in the 1820s; for example, ‘Political Essay,’ *Carlisle Patriot*, 24 October 1818, 3. The Proquest British Periodicals Collection I and II database records the first usage as 1821.

of convex and concave surfaces, reflected and refracted images, subsequently became a standard feature of eighteenth-century treatises of natural philosophy and magic.³ Feeding into this fascination with spatial illusion was the growing dominance of perspectival space in fine art; for example, the National Gallery, London, has an enclosed box, produced in the late 1650s by the Dutch artist, Samuel van Hoogstraten, which cleverly uses angled mirrors to augment the reality-effect of perspectival paintings of a domestic interior. The emergence of the “peepshow” as a public amusement marked a coming together of these philosophical recreations with the entertainment provided by itinerant showmen, either individually on the street or as part of the calendar of fairs and holidays. In Britain, travelling raree shows first achieve cultural visibility around the 1680s.⁴ In *The Cryes of London drawne after the life* (1687), a series of prints depicting those who hawked their wares on the streets, the Dutch artist, Marcellus Laroon, presented the raree showman as a familiar figure in the capital (Fig. 1). Even in this early illustration, the showman is identified through his oral presence, using his “cry” to compete with other street traders. Other contemporaneous references show that the raree show was already a trope for trickery, illusion, and seductive spectacle. Earlier the same decade, in 1681, Stephen College was sentenced to death for publishing a political pamphlet called *The Raree Show*, which satirised Charles II as a lecherous religious hypocrite carrying the government, Lords and Bishops in a show-box on his back (Rahn 1972, 77–98). Similarly, a character in Aphra Behn’s *The Unfortunate Bride: Or, The Blind Lady a Beauty. A Novel*, declares that “[w]omen enjoy’d, are like Romances read, or Raree-shows once seen, meer tricks of the slight of hand, which, when found out, you only wonder at your selves for wondering so before at them” (Behn 1700, 9).

Early raree shows were as likely to exhibit curiosity cabinets, automata, or marionettes as a succession of enclosed pictures viewed through circular holes or lenses. Willem van Mieris’s 1718 painting, *De rarekiek*, portrays a pedlar opening a curiosity box to show a narrative sequence of scenes of carved figures in relief. At least some shows did rely on optical effects though, as evidenced by Charles Johnson’s play, *The Generous Husband: Or, the Coffee House Politician* (1711), performed at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane:

³ See, for example, Harris, Joseph (1775). *Treatise on Optics*. London: B Harris; Ozanam, Jacques (1708). *Recreations Mathematical and Physical...* London: R. Broswick; Hooper, William (1774). *Rational Recreations in which the Principles of Numbers and Natural Philosophy are Clearly and Copiously Elucidated, By a Series of Easy, Entertaining Experiments*. London.

⁴ An earlier continental depiction of a raree show from 1660 is *La Curiosité*, an engraving by Noel La Mire after a painting by Reinier Brakenberg.



Fig. 1. Marcellus Laroon, *O Rare Shoe* (1687). EXEBD 70244. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.

Oh Woman, Woman! We look at thee all our Lives thro' a Multiplying-Glass; we pass our days in the Folly of a Child's Raree Show; in peeping thro' a piece of Isin-Glass at painted Baubles; but if we turn the wrong end of the perspective, or but behold them with the naked eye, we see Vanity, Hypocrisy, Envy, Malice, Inconstancy [...]. (Johnson 1711, 57)

This raree show's description as a type of child's play expresses not so much that the young formed its principal audience, but that it encouraged a rapt, naïve, wondrous viewing. Both Behn and Johnson compare the show-box with femininity in order to critique its alluring yet illusory performance. Sensory optical effects that disrupted the transparent rationality of vision were outside the patriarchal, political, order.

Travelling peep showmen became a common-sight in eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Britain: they were a staple presence at events wherever crowds would gather. The cost of each performance was a penny or, later, a half-penny, making them one of the cheapest and most affordable forms of popular entertainment. One 1718 treatise complained that “*Persons of no small Penetration have been alarm’d at the great Number of Raree-Shows, which of late have pass’d under our Windows*” (C.R. 1718, Dedication). There is an abundance of prints and paintings portraying the peepshow, often as part of subsequent series of London Cries. From these, several recurring features emerge. Firstly, they invariably focus on the showman: he is the central figure of the scene; secondly, while they depict the act of viewing, the actual subject of the show is never seen. The viewer is always left, like the surrounding audience, full of curiosity about what the enclosed box actually contains. This is evident in an engraving after Francis Wheatley’s painting of 1789 from his *London Cries*; a print from William Craig’s *Itinerant Traders of London in Their Ordinary Costume* (1805); one from William H. Pyne’s *Costumes of England* (1808), and a George Cruikshank frontispiece for Peter Parley’s *Sergeant Bell and His Raree Show* (1838) (Figs. 2–5).

Craig and Cruikshank both portray the peep showman as a disabled military veteran, perhaps forced into his new trade as a result of wounds received during the Napoleonic Wars. Given the number of peepshows that were either of Waterloo or which celebrated the latest British military victory, the eye-witness testimony



Fig. 2. Francesco Bartolizzi after Francis Wheatley, “The Peep Show” (1789). EXEBD 70020. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.



Fig. 3. William H. Pyne, “The Half-Penny Showman” (London: William Miller, 1808). EXEBD 70251. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.

and anecdotal colour provided by an ex-serviceman could add an authenticity to the oral performance that might well compensate for his pictures’ lack of veracity. While there was a Romantic fascination with the showman’s itinerant lifestyle, many entered the profession out of necessity, being physically unable for other jobs. The autobiography of George Sanger (the famed circus impresario and owner) recounts how his father became a travelling peepshow exhibitor after being injured while serving at the Battle of Trafalgar (Sanger 1924, 31–35). A peep showman interviewed by Henry Mayhew in 1850 had similarly lost the use of one of his arms when he was three months old, and was later turned out into the streets after his mother died when he was ten.

Prints of peepshows focus on the colourful figure of the showman because his performative role was central to its success. The showman’s narrative accompanying his scenes was the crucial difference between the optical box as a scientific recreation and the peepshow’s status as a popular entertainment. The

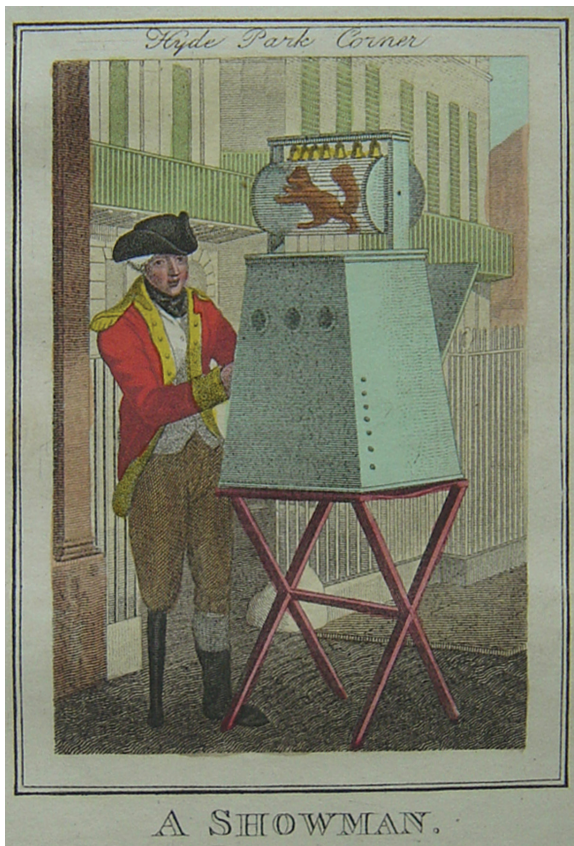


Fig. 4. Edward Edwards after William Marshall Craig, “A Showman” (1805). EXEBD 70357. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.

attraction of the peepshow was as much aural as visual. Pyne’s and Cruikshank’s showman both have trumpets to attract a crowd or add sound effects to their narratives; in Craig’s print of a peepshow at Hyde Park Corner, the showman has a performing squirrel that attracts an audience by ringing the bells above his cage as he runs around. The accompanying text emphasises the fascination created by his performance:

This amusing personage generally draws a crowd around him in whatever street he fixes his moveable pantomime, as the unemployed persons or children who cannot afford the penny or halfpenny insight into the show-box are yet greatly entertained with his descriptive harangues [...]. The show consists of a series of coloured pictures, which the spectator views through a magnifying glass, while the exhibitor rehearses the story, and shifts the scene by the aid of strings. (Craig 1805, n.p.)



Fig. 5. George Cruikshank, frontispiece, *Peter Parley, Sergeant Bell and His Raree Show* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839). EXEBD 42992. Courtesy of Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.

The viewer's engagement with, and understanding of, the scenes was always mediated through the virtuosity of the showman's patter; moreover, given that he controlled the change from one visual scene to another, the tableaux were subservient to the pace of his narrative rather than vice versa. As the earlier quotation from Dickens suggests, many of the scenes were relatively poorly painted and exhibited until they fell apart; it was only through the narrative that you could tell whether the scene was Waterloo or a more recent battle. Or perhaps it did not matter very much because the appeal of the peepshow was much more due to its narrative, aural pleasure, rather than any visual realism.

The voluble and voluminous chat of the peep showman bestrode a fuzzy line between lecturing and showmanship. On the one hand, it was a down-market version of the lectures accompanying touring panoramas, lantern shows, and scientific demonstrations. Yet whereas lecturers usually benefited from a captive, seated audience, a peepshow exhibitor had to gain a peripatetic crowd's confidence and attention using the "uneven blend of information delivery, formal dialogue and banter" that Joe Kember has argued to be one of the characteristics of nineteenth-century showmanship (Kember 2009, 86). One description from the *Girl's Own Paper* typifies the way that the showman's patter could bring a scene to life, imbuing it with drama, historical resonance, patriotic feeling, or curiosity over far-off locations:

Now then! First, "The Battle of Waterloo." On the right you beholds the Duke of Wellington, and on the left that hawful great man, Mr. Bonypart. See how they fights 'and to 'and; see how their 'orses rears and prances, and see the poor dead creaturs lying round 'em. Some people declares that the Duke of Wellington and Mr Bonypart never fought 'and to 'and; but, as I tells 'em, that very picture proves the contrary, for ain't they in the very hact, as large as life. (Beale 1884, 129)

Waterloo is personalised and condensed in a lecture centred on drama rather than history: the showman's oratory alone was said to be worth a penny. His narrative not only brought the scenes to life though but had a vital commercial purpose; namely, to encourage the surrounding audience to desire their own glimpse of the mysteries inside the box. As the great lecturer-showman Albert Smith once noted, the aim of a good patter was not for the people who were already looking because "they have paid, you know, and are of no more use. It's to catch those who are listening" (Smith 1846, 12). Prints and painting of the peepshow invariably show an eager audience that can hear the showman's narrative but not see inside the box. The orality of the show was the key anticipatory draw. While there is tendency to think that the peepshow offers an enclosed viewing experience that is somehow disembodied or solitary, the surrounding crowd, their chatter, and the showman's address means that it was much more communal and aural than it is generally thought.

The familiarity and fondness with which the peep showman was regarded resulted in him becoming a figure percolating into print media. As woodcuts and engravings became more prevalent in popular publishing, a number of children's publications that combined word and image presented themselves as akin to a peepshow. The loquacious showman was deployed as a narrator figure for children just entering the world of literacy, to help them make sense of the unfamiliar combination of type and image. For young readers, the orality of the showman-narrator was used to create a more lively and interactive relationship with the world of print than would otherwise be the case. At one level, this textual

remediation is a sign of familiarity with the peepshow format, particularly the expectation that it would offer knowledge in an entertaining guise; however, it could be also seen as part of the shift away from orality towards print culture that characterised nineteenth-century culture as a whole.

The earliest book I have discovered that remediates the peepshow is concerned very precisely with children's entrance into, and acquisition of, the printed word, in that the format of a raree show is used as part of a primer for learning the alphabet. Joseph Brown's, *The New English Primer, or Reading Made Easy, According to an Improved Plan, for the Use of Schools, and as a First Book for Children* (1790), has, as a final section, a series of small pictures, four to a page, of "The Raree Show, or Pretty Pictures for Good Children." The reward for those who have progressed to the end of the book is their own miniature peepshow; they can make use of their newly-learnt alphabet to imbibe the short homilies printed with the pictures (Brown n.p.). While *The New English Primer* and other early chapbooks use the peepshow format to frame a relatively simple combination of text and image, subsequent children's books draw in a more sophisticated fashion on the mediating role of the showman.⁵ To give two examples: *Peter Parley's Raree Show* (1838) and *Kriss Kringle's Raree Show, For Good Boys and Girls* (1846) are illustrated British and American children's books, which base their appeal on the character of their avuncular narrator. The books are arranged as a series of "sights," in which Kriss Kringle and Peter Parley provide a short narrative to an illustrated scene framed as a peepshow. Just as the implied viewer in the previously discussed prints and paintings is part of the showman's audience, the implied reader of these books is positioned as if s/he is one of the group of children in Cruikshank's frontispiece, looking at the peepshow scene and listening to the showman's lecture.

In their showman's role, Kriss Kringle and Peter Parley directly address their readers as if they were a live peepshow audience. Through their patter and the discussion of the children, the book attempts to recreate an aural narrative that is more interactive and intimate than the silent abstraction of the printed page:

'OH! is that not grand?' 'Is that not splendid?' 'Is it not beautiful?'

These are the exclamations. Next comes the enquiry from several voices.

'Pray, what is it?' 'What does it represent?' 'What is it all about?'

John Oldfied, the boy that is holding his little brother up to see, answers, 'That is Paul Jones's great fight off Flamborough Head, where he beat the English frigate so dreadfully, and made Captain Pearson surrender, when his own ship, that is, Jones's ship, was nearly knocked to bits.' (Kringle 1846, 6)

⁵ See, for example, *Squire Summerton's Picture Gallery* (1800). London: T. Batchelor; *The Raree Show* (1800). London.

Roland Barthes once noted, when speech is translated into writing, what is lost are “all those scraps of language – of the type ‘Isn’t that right?’ – that the linguist would doubtless place in the category of one of the great functions of language, the *phatic* or interpellant function; when we speak, we want our interlocutor to listen to us” (Barthes 1991, 4–5). This interpellation is precisely what the garrulous showman’s patter is full of and what the written narrative attempts to recreate. The personae of Kriss Kringle and Peter Parley make these books ideal for being read ‘live,’ aloud to children with different levels of literacy. Long after the peepshow itself was in decline, illustrated children’s publications that employed the showman narrator continued to appear. For example, the *Picture Book for Little Children* (1864), published by the Religious Tract Society, uses the figure of John Robins the peep showman to introduce a series of improving incidents. Later examples include *The Fool’s Paradise* (1872), Mrs George Cupples’s *Sights at a Peepshow; Or, Pretty Pictures and Pleasing Stories* (1874), F.M. Allen’s *Through Green Glasses* (1888), and *Our Parlour Panorama* (1882) (cf. Plunkett 2007, 1–25).

Peepshow Tableaux: Artists, Genres, and Aesthetics

Much like the prints and paintings of the peepshow, there is a tantalising aporia in its historiography regarding what exactly was viewed, with an undue reliance on the evidence provided by those episodes where exhibitors were criticised or prosecuted for indecent pictures. Research by early film scholars has, unsurprisingly, largely focused on the period 1880–1910, yet, in so doing, has had the unintended effect of neglecting the long period when the format was at its most successful; an examination of the predominant subject matter and pictorial conventions of peepshow tableaux suggests a much more protean, nimble device than is often presumed. It also reveals that the fortunes of the peepshow were bound up with the success of popular theatre and narrative painting, as well as developments in formal education and illustrated journalism.

Peepshows often presented a conglomeration of subject matter – religious, patriotic, fairy-tale, military, historic, theatrical, topographical – as well as the latest notorious murder or current event. Its ‘low’ status was as much a reflection of its exhibition sites, in particular the perceived disrepute of the fair, as any predisposition towards indecency. When William Hone visited Bartholomew Fair in September 1825, the peepshow views he saw included the notorious murder of William Weare and the execution of his murderer, the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, Daniel in the Den of Lions, St Paul’s conversion, the Tower of

Babel, the Greenland Whale-Fishery, the Battle of Waterloo, A View of the City of Dublin, and the Coronation of George IV (Hone 1825, 1172). A description from 1870 similarly typifies the hotch-potch of subject matter as well as the use of rudimentary sound effects:

After the peepshow – at which I saw Moses in the bulrushes, the Battle of the Baltic – whereat the cannonade was represented by the vigorous shaking together of dry peas in a tin can, the murder of the Babes in the Wood, and the shipwreck of St. Paul, where that great apostle was wonderfully and miraculously supported in the water by grasping at a straw [...]. (Greville 1880, 58)

Such a mixture of scenes was necessary if the peepshow was to have a broad appeal to audiences of different ages and interests.

While most showmen provided a range of scenes, certain subject matter were nonetheless perennial favourites. Battle scenes were always popular, particularly Trafalgar, Waterloo, and, later, the Crimea. Mayhew was told that “[a] peep show with a battle scene is sure of its coster audience” (Mayhew 1861, vol. 1, 15). Murders and recent national occasions, such as royal events, were also popular subjects. The Rush murder of 1849 was apparently the only show ever to outdo the Battle of Waterloo; Sanger, too, notes that scenes from the notorious “Murder in the Red Barn” were particularly successful. Before the advent of illustrated newspapers, peepshow scenes were a rudimentary form of reportage; Mayhew’s peep showman suggested this was particularly so with touring provincial shows. Country towns preferred to find out about the latest event; condensed versions of theatrical plays were said to be no good “cause they don’t understand such things there” (Mayhew 1861, vol. 3, 88–89). Staple scenes could always be adapted if necessary. When at a fair in Wantage, Berkshire, Sanger’s father reputedly witnessed the murder of a local landlady in a tavern. Some scenes in his possession were quickly altered to portray her virtual decapitation; a woman’s body cut from another picture was pasted onto a background scene. Her head was pasted onto the floor separately, “and with a plentiful supply of carmine for gore the trick was done” (Sanger 1924, 51). Similarly, when Sanger’s father and family were at Monmouth Fair in 1839, they were caught up in the Chartist riots at Newport. The subject was soon added to the peepshow, complete with the young Sanger’s patter of their eyewitness accounts. Sanger’s interest, however, was commercial rather than political in that his autobiography admits knowing little about the Charter.

For children of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the travelling peepshow was an important source of information and wonder concerning the wider world. An autobiographical article in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* from 1838 pays homage to their educational role in the period prior to the extensive

circulation of illustrated books and journals. The author – most likely Robert Chambers – declares that the boys of the small Scottish town in which he and his brother grew up (Peebles in the Scottish Borders) knew no happiness equal to that conferred upon them by the sight of a raree show. Chambers eloquently describes the show's ability to hold the boys' attention:

The creatures seemed riveted by their eyes to the box. There was such an intense direction of their whole head and face to the speculum, that you could have imagined them to be inspired by an anxiety to ooze themselves in at the hole. All so silent too – fixed attention all. The mere bodies – everything but the head – appeared quite superfluous and useless. There was a curious drooping powerlessness about the back [...]. And so it was also curious to observe how wistfully those who had no halfpence would behold their enjoying companions. There was no lack in *them* of a power to read the backs of the inlookers. Every posture, every gesture carried to them some signification of the wonders which they were forbidden to behold. (Chambers 1838, 105)

Shedding their bodies, temporarily shut off from the immediate world around them, Chambers describes an audience wholly immersed in the scene. Their silence testifies to the intensity and raptness of their attention. Yet the “inlookers” constitute another performance for waiting audience; their bodily movement becomes a proxy for the hidden drama inside the show-box, creating suspense and anticipation for the onlookers.

The showman seen by young William and Robert was an old man by the name of Ben Minory. He came round to their village once every two years or so; it was through his peepshow that the Chambers brothers “first became acquainted with any part of the world beyond our own limited and rural range” (Chambers 1838, 105). His scenes included the Court of Versailles, the Vatican, Brandywine Creek, Vauxhall Gardens, the Duke of Brunswick's Palace in Germany, and, last and finest of all, Lord Rodney's Victory over the French in the West Indies in 1782. Like so many others, his entertainment consisted of a disconnected series of topographical scenes and national events, both historical and contemporary. Minory's narrative of his last scene is suggestive of its composition but equally exemplifies the way that his performance was necessary to give meaning to the picture:

You see the French drawn up in a semi-circle to leeward, and the British fleet bearing down upon it. Lord Rodney, in the foremost vessel, has already cut the line, and is about to engage with two vessels at once. You see the signals flying for action, and see the smoke rising from some of the French vessels. But it was all in vain, for Rodney disabled and took many of them; but all them he took were lost after, as they were coming home to England, only twelve men escaping in a boat to tell the sorrowful tale. (Chambers 1838, 105)

Minory was born Robert Brown in 1737, the son of Lord Delaval's coachmen; he had formerly been a post boy at an inn, before travelling to the West Indies at

the time of the American War of Independence. Like other showmen, he could recount at first hand the events in his final scene. When he was no longer fit enough to be a post boy, he bought his show-box from an Italian showman, Ben Minori, taking on both his pictures and his name.

Despite the reportage and education provided by the peepshow, however limited, its appeal was often associated with the naiveté and gullibility of popular audiences, all too willing to crane their necks, gaze wide-eyed and open-mouthed, and be seduced by the showman's patter. The trope was particularly associated with the peepshow because it catered to predominantly rural and/or juvenile audiences. Metropolitan stereotypes of backward rural audiences are, for example, much in evidence in Tom Williams' play, *The Peepshow Man*, first performed at the New Surrey Theatre in 1868. The eponymous hero is Jack Trudget, a sailor turned itinerant peep showman, who travels around remote Devon villages seeking to find the daughter of his former Captain:

I ain't done a bad piece of business this morning – one and nine! The worst o' these here country folks is, they're so plaguey fond o' the 'hinstitooshun' that when they gets their heye ag'in the glass there ain't no *indoocin'* 'em to take it away ag'in they arn't got no notion o' the wally o' time in the prowinces! Why only a minnit ago, a respectable father of a family, in a smock frock, had the imperence to ask if I couldn't let him and his wife, and his fourteen children have a peep for the combined sum of twopence halfpenny – why, they'd ha' been a week over it! (Williams 1868, 6)

Trudget's complaint against his rural audiences having no notion of the value of time, and by extension not understanding modernity itself, is more complex than at first appears; for while an easy hit at their simplicity and ignorance, it could equally be regarded as a sign of their canniness in getting as much viewing for their money as possible.

Audiences were not always as co-operative or entranced as those described by Robert Chambers; indeed, given the boisterousness of the fairs where peepshows were exhibited, this is hardly surprising. One such encounter is described in Arthur Pember's explorations of New York bohemia in the early 1870s. A British-born reporter, Pember worked in the same vein as Mayhew; part of his reportage of New York's underworld included spending several days with two peepshow operators. Much akin to its British counterparts, the American peepshow was a barrel-organ in shape and transported on a four-wheeled truck. It had eight openings to view the pictures, which included "The Battle of Gettysburg," "Three Great Presidents (Washington, Lincoln and Grant)," "The Capitol at Washington," "The Hudson River by Moonlight," "Central Park," and "New York Bay" (Pember 1875, 402). The two operators wintered in Montreal and tramped the US during the summer months; the exhibitor declared his strategy was to always

change the pictures “to suit the proclivities of the natives of the land in which he might happen to be travelling” (Pember 1875, 400). Whilst exhibiting at Chatham Square, New York, their customers included various servants, three children and their grandmother, and several well-dressed, cocky schoolboys, one of whom was determined to show off his sophistication:

As he came to the last he was unwise enough to mutter something which sounded like the words ‘first class fraud.’ Mr Graef, whose ready ear had caught the sounds, was fully equal to the emergency. With a caressing air he seized the right ear of the boy, who was still looking at the last picture, and twisting it and pinching it in a way that though decidedly artistic, must have been very painful, playfully remarked:

‘An’ ain’t that a mighty foine peepshow?’

The boy had the good sense to accept the situation and, saying aloud, ‘Yes, splendid! Best I ever saw,’ he made way for the next comer. (Pember 1875, 409)

Managing a loud, boisterous, and not always sober or compliant audience was an essential skill for the showman. He was usually managing two audiences, delivering the visual narrative to those looking inside, while still organising those milling around the show-box.

Prints of individual showmen deriving from the Cries of London are invaluable; however, their metropolitan bias risks significantly misrepresenting the industrial scale and exhibition practices of the peepshows exhibited by those showmen who travelled the circuit of provincial fairs. Relying solely on the nineteenth century’s own artistic record is problematic because it presents a romanticised picture that downplays the existence of larger-scale, more professional, peepshows. Carrying your peepshow on your back was fine for tramping around London, but the long distances involved in working the fairs from March to October meant that those who did so usually travelled in caravans. Mayhew was told that there were then nine or ten peepshows in London, all of which were “back” peepshows. Caravans were almost exclusively found in the country. There were then 50 such touring caravans. Travelling in caravans meant that the peepshows could be larger and with more lenses, thereby allowing more people to see the show at any one time. Whereas the peepshow exhibited by Mayhew’s interviewee only had five glasses, Sanger’s father’s peepshow in the 1830s had 26 lenses (Mayhew 1861, 89; Sanger 1924, 22). The most expensive peepshow frontage known by Mayhew’s interviewee cost £60, and was mahogany with 36 glasses (Mayhew 1861, 89). In 1883, one show for sale in *The Era* was West’s peepshow, with 45 ten-inch lenses in brass mounts, carved glassboards, nine war paintings 8ft by 3ft, and a group of miniature wax-works, to be sold with or without a travelling wagon (“For Sale” 1883, 11). As business concerns, these caravan peepshows worked on a far grander scale than the itinerant entertainers who carried their show-box on their back.

Few accounts exist of the life of the travelling peepshow exhibitor; probably the most notable is that by Sanger, who was born around 1825. Sanger would become one of the most successful circus impresarios of the period; he bought the famous Astley's Amphitheatre in 1871 for £11,000 and would help found the United Kingdom Showman and Van Dwellers' Protection Association in 1888. However, he started out his career helping out on his father's travelling peepshow when he was only a small boy. His autobiography contains a wealth of information on his early life working the peepshow in the 1830s and 1840s, albeit the anecdotes often seem embroidered by the showman's desire to be a larger-than-life figure. Life was hard; in addition to regular brushes with local magistrates and roughs, the family had to work transporting fish and vegetables in the winter. Their peepshow was nonetheless exhibited as part of a successful touring show that included Madame Gomez, the tallest woman in the world, and some savage cannibal pigmies (who were actually from Bristol with an Irish father and black mother). At night, the peepshow was illuminated by candles, which must have given it a completely different appearance. Nonetheless, as Sanger notes, "as long as they had plenty of colour in the backgrounds [people] were perfectly satisfied" (Sanger 1924, 48).

Sanger's autobiography throws some light on a series of vexed questions. What were the pictures like in a peepshow? Who painted them? Were they as artistically crude as detractors invariably claimed? While many eighteenth-century *vues d'optique* have survived, this is because they are akin to fine art prints in terms of their pictorial conventions: they were not out of place in genteel drawing-room collections. In contrast, the tableaux exhibited by caravan peepshows were invariably painted over or exhibited until they disintegrated. The larger size of travelling peepshows also necessitated larger pictures than has been hitherto realised. In the advertisement from *The Era* previously cited, the pictures were described as being 7ft by 3ft; Sanger similarly notes an 'ordinary' peepshow picture as being 4ft by 2½ft (Sanger 1924, 96). Mayhew's peep showman estimated the size of pictures to be 18in to 2ft in length and about 15in high (Mayhew 1861, 89). The size of these pictures makes them akin to miniature panoramas. For a time, the peepshow was the working person's picture gallery.

There is some evidence that peepshow tableaux were valued according to the number of figures included. Sanger mentions one Irish artist, Jack Kelly, who was "artist in chief" for the close-knit showmen community: a typical 4ft by 2ft picture "of some notorious crime with plenty of colour in it" reputedly cost £3s6d, while a battle scene with many figures cost £7s6d (Sanger 1924, 96). When Mayhew's exhibitor wanted to get new scenes based on the latest play, he paid an artist one shilling for going into the pit and sketching scenes; after that, he received from £1s6d to 2s for painting each scene, and 1d to 1½d for each figure (Mayhew 1861, 89). Whereas *vues d'optique* have few figures and a predisposition towards

architectural and topographical subject matter, thereby encouraging pictorial compositions with exaggerated perspectival effects and long vistas, peepshow tableaux seem to have been generically akin to Victorian narrative paintings, full of individual stories and action.

That peepshows should reflect the popular taste for narrative scenes is unsurprising in that painting tableaux was one of the activities undertaken by jobbing provincial artists. The career of Sam Cook (1806–1859), a Plymouth artist who found success as a water-colourist of Devon views, included painting for showmen. Cook's career began as an assistant to a painter and glazier in Plymouth, producing inn signs as well as theatrical scenery; to pay his way he also painted peepshow tableaux. Many years after his early struggles, he was staying at a house of a friend in Bodmin, Cornwall, when a woman whose peepshow had been burnt came to the house to ask for subscriptions towards her loss. Cook gave her a sovereign: "I remember," said he, "when I used to paint peepshows for a living" ("The Late Samuel Cooke" 1859, 8). Other painters dabbled in similar activities at the beginning of their careers: Clarkson Stanfield, while not stooping as low as to paint peepshow views, was nonetheless responsible for the 'Poecilorama' exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in 1826 (like the peepshow, the scenes were viewed through magnifying lenses, albeit the neologism was intended to disassociate it from travelling shows). Until the advent of photography and cheap illustration, peepshow tableaux were one of the less glamorous commissions for nineteenth-century artists; their composition thereby reflects the dominance of pictorial narrative. Indeed, the guaranteed peepshow 'favourites' – Waterloo, the Crimean War and other patriotic victories – are not so far removed from the large, fine art paintings that undertook extensive tours of British provincial cities in the Victorian period: these 'blockbuster' paintings were often exhibited using gas lighting to enhance their dramatic effect and were sometimes accompanied by a lecturer. Thomas Jones Barker's "The Relief of Lucknow" (1859), which was 18ft long and 12ft high, was viewed by 122,000 people in London alone, before embarking on its long provincial tour ("The Relief of Lucknow" 1861, 2). In addition to Barker, other successful tours, such as Richard Ansdell's "The Fight for the Standard" (1848) and Henry Nelson O'Neil's "Eastward Ho!" (1857) and "Home Again" (1858), were by paintings whose subject matter and panoramic style had parallels in the most successful peepshow tableaux. The peepshow, in all its varieties, had numerous points of overlap with broader fine art practices.

The Peepshow Exhibitor: His Decline and Fall?

The first half of the nineteenth century was the heyday of the travelling peepshow: subsequently, it was a form of entertainment in slow but steady decline. It certainly

did not disappear; indeed, it absolutely remained a fixture at fairs, wakes, and race days. However, it was an increasingly outdated and down-market form of entertainment. This was, in part, due to availability of cheap engravings and photographs. The itinerant showman was, though, equally sidelined by the ever-more organised business of Victorian pleasure, which led to the gradual dominance of large, static venues over traveling exhibitions, and an increasing number of shows competing with fairs. The fate of the peepshow is complicated by the growth of these static venues in that there was a proliferation of exhibitions that had the same viewing practices but which sought to cultivate a more refined and artistic allure. So there was a reinvention, even an expansion, of different types of exhibition offering enclosed scenes viewed through lenses, even as they were increasingly refusing the label of peepshow. The figure who suffered most from this proliferation was the travelling showman: his oral performance was increasingly out of step with the “march of knowledge” and the number of lectures now available through mechanics’ institutes, athenaeums, Sunday schools, church groups, and working men’s associations.

As early as Mayhew’s interview from 1850, his showman was complaining that “[i]t’s a regular starving life now” (Mayhew 1861, 89). He had been forced to get rid of twelve of his condensed plays in order to buy food. At the street markets on Saturday night, he was often obliged to take bottles instead of money because trade was so bad. The trajectory of Sanger’s career is similar: his success with peepshow scenes of King William IV’s death and funeral allowed him to set himself up as an animal trainer, initially touring with his father; yet when his father died in 1849, Sanger did not take over the peepshow; he opened a penny gaff in London in December 1850 before moving on to bigger and better circus shows. Sanger’s shift from travelling fairground entertainment to penny gaff and then large-scale circuses, often in semi-permanent buildings, is a microcosm of the shift towards more organised, static, popular entertainment.

The London peepshow exhibitor’s strongest complaint was that a reduction in the price of theatre tickets, to twopence or thruppence, or a penny in the case of the penny gaff, was destroying his trade. Why view a peepshow in the street for a penny if you could pay the same money and go inside to see various turns at a penny gaff? Come rain or shine the penny theatre could put on a performance; not so the peepshow. There were some 80–100 penny gaffs in London in the late 1830s (Grant 1838, 162). They were competing for the same, largely juvenile, working-class audience as the peepshow; their subject matter was also similar: like the peepshow, they revelled in portraying tales of crime or the latest gruesome murder. That the peepshow was increasingly functioning as a downtrodden offshoot of popular theatre is reflected in Mayhew’s peep showman reporting that most back-peepshows now exhibited condensed versions of recently performed plays such as “Halzoner the

Brave and the Fair Himogen,” “Hyder Halley, or the Lyons of Mysore,” and “The Devil and Doctor Faustus” (Mayhew 1861, 89). At Christmas time, they exhibited pantomimes. In 1843, *Punch* similarly noted that near the Victoria Theatre (now the Old Vic) could be found small exhibitions of “cosmorama boxes, capable of accommodating the heads of two people,” in which were performed edited versions of the most successful recent plays (“New Cut” 1843, 42).

The “cosmorama” was the most common label used to signify an exhibition that had none of the down-market associations of the peepshow. Its advent was tied to the development of more genteel, permanent leisure spaces in the 1820s and 1830s. The London Cosmorama rooms opened in May 1821 at St. James Street, before moving to 209 Regent Street in 1823. Fourteen views were on show and admission was one shilling, putting it on a par not with the penny peepshow but the large-scale diorama and panorama. In June 1824, 10,000 visitors were said to have already visited the exhibition, including most of the nobility and gentry (“Cosmorama” 1824, 1). While the Hellenism of its name, from the Greek *kosmos*, asserts its status, its basic apparatus was but an enlargement of the street peepshow. Yet whereas peepshows used coarsely-coloured prints, the cosmorama employed good quality oil-paintings that were seen through a large convex lens. Views were cleverly exhibited in such a way so that

each of them is seen through a window, fitted up with curtains, a balcony outside, and every accompaniment that can add to the illusion; and the pictures themselves are placed at a considerable distance, and with a clear daylight thrown upon them, while the apartment itself is comparatively dark. (“Dioramas and Cosmoramas” 1823, 495)

Scenes were viewed almost as if they were prospects seen through the windows of an aristocratic house: nothing as vulgar as peeping took place. Nor was there any showman to deliver his patter to accompany the scenes: viewing was more individualised and interiorised.

It is the extensive installation of cosmoramas in the variety of static leisure spaces that makes them significant for the history of the peepshow, and for nineteenth-century popular entertainment in general. Cosmoramas could be found in pleasure gardens, bazaars, and scientific institutions. Most well-known London exhibition venues had their own set of views. They could be found at the Royal Polytechnic, the Royal Panopticon, the Egyptian Hall, the Colosseum, Argyle Rooms and Thames Tunnel, to name just a few.⁶ They first appeared at Vauxhall

⁶ On the Thames Tunnel, see Altick, Richard (1978). *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 374. “Royal Colosseum” (1859). *The Times*. May 9, 1. “Royal Panopticon” (1856). *Weekly Dispatch*. March 2, 12. “Thames Tunnel” (1856). *Daily News*. March 13, 1. “Adelaide Gallery Exhibition” (1850). *Illustrated London News*. November 16, 378.

Gardens as early as 1822, while Cremorne Gardens had the Royal Cremorne Cosmorama that was in place until at least 1857 (“Vauxhall Gardens” 1822, 3). Outside London, the exhibition of cosmoramas was similarly extensive. It played a particularly important role in provincial areas because its small scale made it viable in towns that could not support large permanent exhibitions. To take just one example, in March 1835, Thomas Howe’s Bazaar on Exeter High Street installed four Cosmographic views that could be seen free for those who spent more than one shilling (“Thomas Howe” 1835, 1). It remained an attraction until his death in 1856.

By the mid-1850s, peepshows of all kinds could also be found at the growing number of penny shop shows. These exhibitions could be found throughout London, apart from the West End, and included freaks, waxworks, ventriloquists, theatre, and various optical entertainments. An 1856 article in *Chamber’s Journal* reported visiting one such penny shop-show exhibiting a peepshow of the Crimean War. A dozen people at a time were let in to a darkened room with a lens reputedly “as big as the crown of your hat your own peculiar property for the time being,” through which they saw a series of tableaux from the Crimean War. The scenes were described by a hidden lecturer, whose narrative finished after ten minutes exactly (“Amusements of the Mob” 1856, 225). The invisibility and anonymity of this showman is telling: the intimate, personal, and dialogic encounter between showman and viewer that characterised the travelling peepshow was losing out in the face of the more regulated “lecture” of the penny shop show, as well as the increasing availability of lantern and panorama lectures, often by those with expertise in the relevant scientific, historic, or geographical topic.

The increasing poverty of the peep showman was widely commented on. Alfred Rosling Bennett, looking back on mid-century London, fancied that the device was “decrepit and well on its way to extinction in the 1850s, for its professors were usually poor fellows of the shabbiest description” (Bennett 1924, 60). Events such as the Crimean War, Indian Mutiny, and Sayers-Heenan fight provided only brief respite and “the Raree show died the death, at all events in London” (Bennett 1924, 60). This last qualification is important in that travelling caravans remained fixtures at provincial fairs. By the early 1880s, James Greenwood felt able to label peepshow men as one of the street performers “who have been less fortunate in retaining a hold on the affections of the public” (Greenwood 1883, 54). The last Greenwood remembered seeing was in Camden Town; he had reached the point where the show could be seen for rag and bones, or some old bottles. The declining fortunes of the peepshow were exacerbated in that the fall-off in trade resulted in a lack of investment and a concomitant lack of novelty. Old favourites were reworked time and time again. Mayhew’s peepshow interviewee declared: “It don’t pay now to get up a new play. We works the old ones

over and over again” (Mayhew 1861, 89). The outdatedness of the pictures was similarly mocked by *Punch*; in 1892, it poked fun at a “Fine Art Exhibition” experienced by rustic patrons at a fair, which consisted of peepholes “through which a motley collection of coloured lithographs of the Crimean campaign, faded stereoscopic views, Scriptural engravings, and daubed woodcuts from the ‘Illustrated Police News,’ is arranged for their inspection” (“All Round the Fair” 1892, 256). The assortment of scenes is typical, but the use of recycled prints is a long way from the nimble innovation of earlier showmen, ever ready to adapt their patter to the latest event.

A poem from theatre critic, Henry Chance Newton, suggests another reason of the obsolescence of the penny showman. Recounted through the character of a peep showman, he blames the decline of his art on the rise of formal education. The knowledge provided by his crude views and accompanying ‘lecture’ was now being offered by the Board Schools introduced by the 1870 Education Act:

That’s the way I rattle on, my friends, in ev’ry street or lane,
But receipts is sadly fallin’ off – the drammer’s on the wane!
The kids is too enlightened *now* to patternise my show,
All a-owing to the School Board teaching ‘em such things is low.

[...] No; I’ll defy the workus, gents, alone I’ll toddle on,
Though, like Otherller in the play, “my occupations gone!” (Newton 1886, 8)

The penny shop shows that still exhibited peepshows and cosmoramas were now predominantly located in the poorest districts. In one of the many surveys of East End life during the 1890s, Montagu Williams disapprovingly recorded that the Jack the Ripper case gave rise to a penny show which “dealt exhaustively with the whole series by means of illuminated coloured views, which his patrons inspected through peep-holes” (Williams 1892, 12). The views displayed a pantheon of criminals – fictional and non-fictional – including Jack Sheppard and Charles Peace.

There is one final reason as to why the advent of the mutoscope and similar automatic machines meant a metamorphosis of the spectacle of words that was so much a part of the peepshow experience. The mutoscope’s coin-fed and/or hand-cranked operation had no need of a showman to accompany and enliven every individual performance. Rather than the showman controlling and explaining the unveiling of the pictures, making him both conjuror and narrator, part of the technological novelty of the new devices was that the user could fashion the rhythms of their own experience. To be sure, there were continuities in that showmen’s patter or a “barker” was still often used to draw individuals inside a penny gaff or fairground cosmorama; however, the dialogic relationship between

audience and showman had irrevocably shifted. The appeal of the photographic realism of the pictures superseded the familiarity between viewer and showman. “Automatic” devices form one late episode in the long history of enclosed show-boxes, yet this should not disguise the fact that, for most of the nineteenth century, the oral performance of the peep showman was its organising dynamic.

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